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Dating Violence in Adolescence: An Exploratory Study on Personality Traits, Legitimizing Attitudes and Prevalence

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Abstract

Dating violence is recognized as a global priority for research and intervention. Although legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence and personality traits are considered risk factors, their joint contribution to adolescent dating violence remains limited. This study aimed to characterize the prevalence of dating violence among adolescents and its associations with legitimizing attitudes, neuroticism and agreeableness. The study included 410 Portuguese adolescents aged 14 to 19 years ($M = 17.18$, $SD = 1.39$). Participants completed a sociodemographic questionnaire, the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory–Short Form, the Attitudes Toward Dating Violence

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Scale and the Mini International Personality Item Pool. Results showed that 57.3% of adolescent reported perpetrating at least one form of dating violence and 58.9% reported victimization, with verbal/emotional violence being the most prevalent subtype. No significant gender, developmental stage, or interaction effects was found for overall dating violence perpetration and victimization. However, significant main effects of gender and developmental stage, as well as significant gender × developmental stage interactions, were observed for legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical dating violence. Boys reported higher legitimizing attitudes than girls during middle adolescence, whereas no gender differences were observed during late adolescence. Moreover, only boys showed a significant decline in legitimizing attitudes from middle to late adolescence. Perpetration and victimization were positively associated. Neuroticism and agreeableness were associated with perpetration, but only neuroticism was associated with victimization. Legitimizing attitudes explained additional variance beyond traits. These findings support prevention programs targeting violence-supportive beliefs during adolescence and inform future research on the interplay among personality traits, legitimizing attitudes and dating violence.

Keywords
dating violence, legitimizing attitudes, neuroticism, agreeableness, adolescents

Introduction

Adolescence constitutes a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, marked by physical, cognitive, emotional and social transformations (Arnett, 2013; Papalia et al., 2006). Beyond being a developmental stage, it is also a cultural construct whose duration and experiences vary according to sociocultural context (Arnett, 2013). According to Collins et al. (2009), it can be subdivided into three phases: early (ages 10–13), middle (ages 14–17) and late adolescence (ages 18–20). The development of romantic interests, intimacy and romantic identity represents an important developmental task during adolescence, regardless of whether adolescents are actively involved in dating relationships (Avilés et al., 2021). These relationships, defined as continuous and voluntary interactions, characterized by mutual recognition, emotional intensity and expressions of affection, may occur among adolescents of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Collins et al., 2009).

Romantic relationships evolve from exploratory and affiliative encounters in early adolescence to relationships characterized by increasingly greater

emotional and sexual closeness throughout middle and late adolescence (Furman & Rose, 2015; Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2020). It should be noted that these developmental patterns are largely derived from Western samples and may vary across cultural contexts in terms of norms surrounding intimacy, sexuality and relationship formation (Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Rose, 2015).

Although romantic relationships are linked to enhanced self-concept, social competence and greater overall well-being (Avilés et al., 2021; Boisvert & Poulin, 2016; Collins et al., 2009; Kochendorfer & Kerns, 2020; Viejo et al., 2015), it may also involve maladaptive interaction patterns (Furman & Rose, 2015). When characterized by instability or conflict, romantic relationships may become a context for significant risks, among which dating violence emerges as a major public health concern (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). Dating violence, also recognized as a specific type of intimate partner violence (Furman & Rose, 2015), encompasses behaviors that cause physical, sexual and/or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors, perpetrated by a current or former partner (WHO, 2024). Another type of dating violence has been conceptualized, cyber dating violence, defined as a form of psychological violence exercised through the inappropriate use of technology, which includes behaviors such as online monitoring, obtaining passwords without permission (Borrajo et al., 2015; Caridade & Braga, 2020; Caridade et al., 2019). Importantly, these forms of violence are often interrelated and co-occur, with evidence suggesting that digital abuse frequently complements and extends offline patterns of control and aggression within adolescent romantic relationships (Caridade et al., 2020b; Rodríguez-de Arriba et al., 2024). This phenomenon has been recognized as a global research and intervention priority (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2023). It is estimated that about one third of adolescents experience some form of dating violence (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021). In the European context, however, studies have identified diverse and often elevated prevalence rates. For instance, in Spain, 57.2% of adolescents aged 11 to 17 years ($n = 862$) reported experiences of dating violence (Villanueva-Blasco et al., 2025). Similarly, in Sweden, a prevalence of 59.7% was observed among adolescents aged 15 to 19 years ($n = 956$; Korkmaz et al., 2022). In Portugal, reported experiences reached 66.3% of participants aged 12 to 22 years ($n = 6{,}732$; Magalhães et al., 2025). Regarding cyber dating abuse, a systematic review conducted by Caridade et al. (2019) reported that rates of cyber victimization through digital control ranged from 65% to 81% across the 44 studies analyzed. More specifically, perpetration rates of some form of cyber dating abuse ranged from 8.1% to 93.7%, while victimization rates ranged from 5.8% to 92%.

The associated outcomes of dating violence are multiple and manifest across academic, emotional and behavioral domains. These include both

short- and long-term risks, such as poor school performance, early dropout, substance abuse, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms, as well as suicidal ideation or attempts, repetition of violent patterns in future relationships and heightened risk of domestic violence in adulthood (Piolanti et al., 2023; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Valdivia-Salas et al., 2022; Yanez-Peñúñuri et al., 2023).

Despite these well-documented outcomes, research has identified a range of risk factors associated with dating violence (Capaldi et al., 2012). Beyond contextual and relationship dynamics, dating violence is rooted in individual-level risk factors (Capaldi et al., 2012). From this perspective, both personality traits and legitimizing attitudes represent distinct, yet complementary factors of individual dimensions: while the former reflect broad dispositional tendencies, the latter provide a socio-cognitive structure through which interpersonal conflicts are interpreted (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall et al., 2011). Collectively, these individual dimensions may further contribute to the understanding of the variability in adolescents' experiences of dating violence.

Present Study

The present study is grounded in the general aggression model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002), an integrative framework that conceptualizes aggressive behavior as the outcome of the interplay between person and situation inputs. Focusing on the model's person inputs, this research examines dispositional traits, which reflect stable predispositions and susceptibilities that heighten a general readiness to violence, and legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence, which serve as specific evaluations that target and justify violence within relational contexts. Together, these dimensions bias the appraisal and decision-making processes that drive dating violence outcomes (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall et al., 2011).

Among dispositional factors, neuroticism and agreeableness were selected based on both theoretical alignment with the GAM and empirical evidence. Meta-analytic findings indicate that these traits show some of the most consistent associations with aggressive behavior among the Big Five dimensions (Bettencourt et al., 2006), and they have also emerged as relevant predictors in the context of dating violence (Hines & Saudino, 2008), albeit primarily in adult and college samples. Neuroticism and agreeableness function as dispositional person inputs that shape internal affective and cognitive states, influencing responses to interpersonal conflict (Barlett & Anderson, 2012; DeWall et al., 2011; Ulloa et al., 2016). Neuroticism, characterized by emotional instability, heightened negative affect, need for control and increased reactivity, may predispose adolescents to engage in perpetration, as heightened

reactivity and negative emotions can intensify aggressive responses during conflicts. Simultaneously, neuroticism may also increase susceptibility to victimization, as heightened sensitivity and difficulty managing stress can make adolescents more vulnerable to being targeted or drawn into conflictual interactions (Hines & Saudino, 2008; Ulloa et al., 2016). Agreeableness, associated with empathy, trust, cooperativeness and altruism, may predispose to lower levels of perpetration, as prosocial tendencies and adaptive interpersonal regulation reduce the likelihood of initiating aggression. Agreeableness may also be protective against victimization, as cooperative and empathic behaviors can foster more harmonious interactions and reduce the probability of conflict escalation (Hines & Saudino, 2008; Ulloa et al., 2016).

Complementing these dispositional tendencies, legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence represent socio-cognitive evaluations that guide the interpretation of relational situations. Endorsing such attitudes may facilitate perpetration, as they provide cognitive justification for aggressive behaviors, while simultaneously influencing victimization, as individuals who accept or normalize violence may tolerate or fail to resist aggressive acts directed at them (Beckmann et al., 2021; Borges et al., 2020; Capaldi et al., 2012; Caridade et al., 2020; Cava et al., 2023; Fernández-González et al., 2018; García-Carpintero-Muñoz et al., 2023; Ludin et al., 2017; Mattson et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2023; Vagi et al., 2013; Valdivia-Salas et al., 2022; Ybarra & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2019).

Considered together, these dispositional characteristics (i.e., neuroticism and agreeableness) and socio-cognitive evaluations (i.e., legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical dating violence) offer a coherent framework for understanding patterns of teen dating violence. Although prior research has extensively documented associations between legitimizing attitudes and dating violence (Beckmann et al., 2021; Borges et al., 2020; Capaldi et al., 2012; Caridade et al., 2020; Cava et al., 2023; Fernández-González et al., 2018; García-Carpintero-Muñoz et al., 2023; Ludin et al., 2017; Mattson et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2023; Vagi et al., 2013; Valdivia-Salas et al., 2022; Ybarra & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2019) and other studies have examined associations between personality traits and dating violence (Chen et al., 2024; Hines & Saudino, 2008; Ulloa et al., 2016), integrating both dispositional traits and legitimizing attitudes within a single theoretically grounded model, particularly in adolescent samples, remains limited. Moreover, much of the existing research has focused on university or adult populations (Caridade & Machado, 2013; Saial et al., 2025), highlighting the need to further explore these associations in earlier developmental stages. Within this context, the present study examines the joint and incremental contribution of these person inputs to dating violence, evaluating the extent to which legitimizing attitudes

explain additional variance beyond dispositional characteristics, as specific evaluative structures that justify and drive the decision-making process (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall et al., 2011). The study further examines whether dating violence and legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence vary according to gender and developmental stage, as well as whether these factors interact. This approach is supported by evidence documenting gender-related differences in the expression of aggressive behaviors, social norms and relationship dynamics (Bowen & Walker, 2015; Capaldi et al., 2012; Caridade, 2025; Caridade & Machado, 2013; Dosil et al., 2020; Neves et al., 2018; Reyes et al., 2016), alongside developmental changes in emotional regulation, interpersonal experience and broader cognitive and psychosocial development throughout adolescence (Capaldi et al., 2012; Caridade, 2025; Collins et al., 2009; Dosil et al., 2020; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the present study was guided by the following research question and hypotheses:

RQ: What is the 12-month prevalence of dating violence among adolescents, and how are legitimizing attitudes toward physical and psychological violence characterized within this sample?

H1: Dating violence perpetration, victimization and legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence will differ according to gender and developmental stage, with the effects of each factor expected to depend on the other.

H2: Neuroticism, agreeableness and legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical dating violence will be significantly associated with dating violence, such that higher neuroticism and stronger legitimizing attitudes will be positively associated, whereas higher agreeableness will be negatively associated.

H3: Legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical dating violence will significantly predict dating violence after controlling for the effects of neuroticism and agreeableness.

Methodology

Sample

The sample consisted of 410 adolescents, most of whom were female ($n = 274$, 66.8%). The majority reported a heterosexual orientation ($n = 340$, 83.5%), were enrolled in the 12th grade ($n = 144$, 35.6%), and were either currently in a relationship ($n = 158$, 38.6%) or had been in a romantic relationship in the past ($n = 158$, 38.6%). Participants' ages ranged from 14 to 19 years ($M = 17.18$,

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample.

Variable	*N*	%
Gender		
Male	134	32.7
Female	274	66.8
Other	2	0.5
Age		
14	12	2.9
15	55	13.4
16	58	14.1
17	81	19.8
18	131	32
19	73	17.8
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	340	83.5
Homosexual	18	4.4
Bisexual	42	10.3
Pansexual	2	0.5
Prefer not to answer	5	1.3
School grade		
9th	8	2
10th	70	17.2
11th	66	16.3
12th	144	35.6
Higher education	117	28.9
Relationship status		
Currently in a relationship	158	38.6
Not currently, but has been	158	38.6
Never been in a relationship	93	22.8

SD = 1.39), with 50.2% ($n = 206$) in middle adolescence and 49.8% ($n = 204$) in late adolescence (see Table 1).

Measures

A sociodemographic questionnaire was developed to collect information on age, gender, sexual orientation, school grade and relationship status. Dating violence was assessed using the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory–Short Form (CADRI-S), Fernández-González et al. (2012), Portuguese adaptation by Cunha et al. (2023). This self-report scale includes

20 items distributed across five subscales: (a) threatening behavior (two items; e.g., "I threatened to hurt my partner"); (b) relational violence (two items; e.g., "I spread rumors about my partner"); (c) physical violence (two items; e.g., "I slapped or pulled my partner's hair"); (d) sexual violence (two items; e.g., "I touched my partner sexually when they did not want to"); (e) verbal/emotional violence (two items; e.g., "I insulted my partner with offensive remarks"). Each behavior is assessed in terms of presence, frequency and type of violence, over the past 12 months, considering both perpetration and victimization. Responses are rated on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*often*). The total scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$), and the global perpetration and victimization dimensions also showed adequate reliability ($\alpha = .73$ and $\alpha = .81$, respectively). Legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence were assessed with the *Dating Violence Attitudes Scale* (EAVN), Price et al. (1999), Portuguese adaptation by Saavedra et al. (2008). This self-report scale comprises 76 items for youth aged 12 to 19 and is divided into 6 subscales. Four were used in the present study: (a) male psychological violence (15 items; e.g., "There is no reason for a boy to insult his girlfriend"); (b) male physical violence (12 items; e.g., "Some girls deserve to be slapped by their boyfriends"); (c) female psychological violence (13 items; e.g., "There is no reason for a girl to insult her boyfriend"); (d) female physical violence (12 items; e.g., "Some boys deserve to be slapped by their girlfriends"). The scale assesses tolerance or legitimation of psychological and physical violence, differentiated by gender. Responses range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For analysis, two global dimensions were created: legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence (male and female; $\alpha = .87$) and legitimizing attitudes toward physical violence (male and female; $\alpha = .91$), both showing excellent reliability (Pallant, 2011). Personality traits were assessed with the Portuguese version of the Mini International Personality Item Pool (Mini-IPIP), Donnellan et al. (2006), Portuguese adaptation by Oliveira (2019). This 20-item self-report scale includes five dimensions (Extraversion, Intellect/Openness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Agreeableness), with four items per dimension, rated on a Likert scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). In this study, only Neuroticism (e.g., "I get stressed out easily") and Agreeableness (e.g., "I am not really interested in others") were included. The internal consistency for these subscales yielded $\alpha = .56$ and $\alpha = .68$, respectively. While below conventional thresholds, these values are expected for brief measures with only four items per dimension and have been observed in previous adolescent research (Downey et al., 2014; Ďuricová & Poliach, 2023). Mean inter-item correlation (MIC) further supported the

use of these scales for analyses, falling within the recommended range of 0.15 to 0.50 (0.34 and 0.24, respectively; Streiner et al., 2015).

Procedures

Data Collection. Permission was obtained from the authors of all instruments, and a research protocol was developed including a sociodemographic questionnaire and informed consent forms for participants and their legal guardians. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of a public educational institution. Participants were adolescents aged 14 to 19 years, corresponding to middle through late adolescence (Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Rose, 2015). Recruitment combined two strategies. In school context, a snowball sampling approach was applied: eligible adolescents initially recruited were invited to refer peers within the same age range, facilitating sample expansion through existing social networks. In clinical setting (primary care), recruitment followed a convenience sampling strategy via professional referral, with providers indicating eligible adolescents based on age criteria (Ahmed, 2024). Data collection occurred exclusively in person, with at least one member of the research team supervising, ensuring that each participant responded only once, preventing duplicate responses. Eligibility was verified at the time of administration based on age criteria. For participants aged 14 to 17, written parental/legal guardian consent was obtained prior to participation, and adolescent assent was secured at the time of data collection. Participants aged 18 to 19 provided their own written informed consent. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were informed that support services were available within their school or primary clinical settings should they experience discomfort or wish to seek assistance. Data were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was obtained, precluding individual follow-up. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential, with no financial compensation, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Code of Ethics of the Portuguese Psychologists' Association.

Regarding the assessment of legitimizing attitudes, only the psychological and physical violence subscales of the EAVN were administered. The sexual violence subscales were excluded due to institutional considerations associated with school-based data collection in the adolescent sample of this study. During the ethical approval process, concerns were raised about administering an extensive set of items addressing sexual violence attitudes. To ensure institutional authorization and feasibility, the decision was made to retain only the physical and psychological dimensions. It should be noted that sexual violence was assessed behaviorally through the CADRI-S instrument, allowing partial coverage of this domain.

Data Analysis. The study employed a cross-sectional design, examining associations among variables at a single point in time. As a result, causal inferences cannot be drawn, and predictive language refers only to potential relationships (So et al., 2026). Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine potential differences between school-based and clinical participants. Independent samples *t*-tests were used for continuous variables (dating violence perpetration and victimization, legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence, neuroticism and agreeableness), and chi-square tests were used for categorical variables (gender and adolescence stage). No statistically significant differences were observed, and effect sizes were small; therefore, the subsamples were combined for all subsequent analyses (Field, 2013).

Descriptive statistics were used to characterize sociodemographic variables and to analyze the prevalence of dating violence and legitimizing attitudes. To facilitate interpretation, categorizations were created in line with the original instruments. In the CADRI-S (0 = *never* to 3 = *often*), responses were dichotomized: 0 recoded as "Never occurred" and 1 to 3 as "Occurred." This approach captured the presence of violent behaviors regardless of frequency, avoiding underestimation of low-intensity occurrences. In the EAVN (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), responses were grouped into three categories: "Disagree" (1–2), "Neutral" (3) and "Agree" (4–5). Mean intervals were defined as 1 to 2.49 "Disagree," 2.50 to 3.49 "Neutral" and 3.50 to 5 "Agree," ensuring equidistance while preserving fidelity to the original scale. For dating violence analyses, only adolescents reporting current or past romantic relationship experience were included, as required for the valid administration of the CADRI-S. Participants without such experience, or with missing CADRI-S data, were excluded from analyses involving dating violence (i.e., *t*-tests, correlational and regression analysis). In contrast, the EAVN was administered to the full sample, regardless of relationship experience. For the hierarchical multiple regression, the analysis was conducted on a subsample ($n = 271$) of participants with valid data on all predictors included in the model (i.e., neuroticism, agreeableness, legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical dating violence). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Pallant, 2011). For the Mini-IPIP four-item per subscale, MIC were also examined to provide a more stable estimate of internal reliability (Streiner et al., 2015). This approach was adopted since Cronbach's alpha is sensitive to scale length and characteristically yields lower estimates for brief measures, particularly those comprising fewer than 10 items (Pallant, 2011). For bivariate correlational and regression analyses, CADRI-S global scores were used, and only the global perpetration score was included in the hierarchical multiple regression model due to the absence of significant bivariate associations with victimization (Pallant, 2011).

Inferential analyses included factorial analyses of variance (ANOVAs), correlational analyses and hierarchical multiple regression. Two 2×2 factorial ANOVAs were conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of gender (boys vs. girls) and developmental stage (middle vs. late adolescence) on legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical dating violence. A 2×2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of gender, developmental stage and their interaction on dating violence perpetration and victimization. Whenever a significant interaction was observed, follow-up simple-effects analyses with Bonferroni adjustments were conducted. Partial eta squared (η^2_p) was reported as an estimate of effect size. Associations among continuous variables, including dating violence perpetration and victimization, legitimizing attitudes and personality traits, were examined using Pearson correlation coefficients (Field, 2013). Prior to the analyses, the relevant statistical assumptions were assessed, including normality, homogeneity of variance, equality of covariance matrixes, linearity and independence (Field, 2013). Minor deviations from normality were observed. Spearman's rho correlations were additionally conducted as sensitivity analyses and yielded an equivalent pattern of results. Although Levene's tests were significant for the legitimizing-attitude outcomes, the relatively large cell sizes supported the use of factorial ANOVA, and the findings were interpreted with appropriate caution. The equality of covariance matrixes in the MANOVA was assessed using Box's M test. Because Box's M was statistically significant, multivariate effects were interpreted using Pillai's trace, which is considered more robust to violations of the equality of covariance matrixes assumption (Field, 2013). Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to examine predictors of dating violence perpetration, with personality traits (neuroticism and agreeableness) entered in the first block and legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence in the second block (Field, 2013). Regression assumptions were formally checked: multicollinearity (tolerance >0.10; variance inflation factor [VIF] <5), independence of residuals (Durbin–Watson = 1.72) and influence of cases (maximum Cook's distance = 0.281). Minor deviations from normality and heteroscedasticity were addressed using bootstrapping (2,000 resamples; 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals), ensuring robust estimation of coefficients (Field, 2013). Regression was not pursued for victimization, as neuroticism was its only significant bivariate associate.

Results

Overall, 57.3% ($n = 165$) of adolescents reported perpetrating at least one form of dating violence in the past 12 months, while 58.9% ($n = 168$) reported

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Prevalence of Dating Violence by Type and Direction.

Types and direction of dating violence	Never occurred[a]		Already occurred[b]		Total		Minimum (0)	Maximum (3)
	n	%	*n*	%	*N*	%		
Global perpetration	123	42.7	165	57.3	288	100	0	1.5
Physical perpetration	279	93.9	18	6.1	297	100	0	1.5
Relational perpetration	276	93.6	19	6.4	295	100	0	2
Verbal/emotional perpetration	129	43.7	166	56.3	295	100	0	3
Threatening perpetration	272	91.6	25	8.4	297	100	0	2.5
Sexual perpetration	290	97.6	7	2.4	297	100	0	1
Global victimization	117	41.1	171	58.9	285	100	0	2.2
Physical victimization	276	93.9	18	6.1	294	100	0	2
Relational victimization	247	84.3	46	15.7	293	100	0	3
Verbal/emotional victimization	128	43	169	57	297	100	0	3
Threatening victimization	263	88.6	34	11.4	297	100	0	3
Sexual victimization	266	89.3	32	10.7	298	100	0	2

[a]Never occurred = 0.
[b]Already occurred = 0.1 to 3.

victimization. Among perpetration subtypes, 6.1% ($n = 18$) reported physical aggression, 8.4% ($n = 25$) threats, 6.4% ($n = 19$) relational aggression, 56.3% ($n = 166$) verbal/emotional aggression and 2.4% ($n = 7$) sexual aggression. Regarding victimization, 6.1% ($n = 18$) reported physical, 11.4% ($n = 34$) threats, 15.7% ($n = 46$) relational, 10.7% ($n = 32$) sexual and 57% ($n = 169$) verbal/emotional victimization. Of the initial sample, 93 participants were excluded from the analyses because they did not report having current or past romantic relationship experience. More detailed information on these data can be found in Table 2.

Concerning legitimizing attitudes, only 0.3% ($n = 1$) endorsed psychological violence, with the vast majority rejecting it (91.3%, $n = 360$). No participant endorsed physical violence, with 93.8% ($n = 374$) disagreeing with such attitudes (see Table 3).

To examine differences in legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence, two 2×2 factorial ANOVAs were conducted, with gender (boys vs. girls) and developmental stage (middle vs. late adolescence) as fixed factors (Table 4). For psychological attitudes toward psychological violence, significant main effects were observed for gender, $F(1, 390) = 23.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .057$, and developmental stage, $F(1, 390) = 19.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .048$. These main effects were qualified by a significant gender $\times$ developmental stage interaction, $F(1, 390) = 5.57$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2_p = .014$. Bonferroni-adjusted simple-effects analyses indicated that boys reported significantly higher legitimizing attitudes than

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Legitimizing Attitudes Toward Dating Violence.

Types of legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence	Disagree[a] (%)	Neutral[b] (%)	Agree[c] (%)	Total		Minimum (1)	Maximum (5)
				N	%		
Legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence	91.3	8.4	0.3	394	100	1	3.57
Legitimizing attitudes toward physical violence	93.8	6.2	—	397	100	1	3.33

[a]Disagreee (disagreement with legitimizing attitudes) = 1 to 2.49.
[b]Neutral (neither agree nor disagree with legitimizing attitudes) = 2.50 to 3.49.
[c]Agree (agreement with legitimizing attitudes) = 3.50 to 5.

Table 4. Results of the 2 × 2 Factorial Analyses of Variance Examining the Effects of Gender and Developmental Stage on Legitimizing Attitudes Toward Psychological and Physical Dating Violence.

	Psychological violence			Physical violence		
Source	$F(1, 390)$	p	η^2_p	$F(1, 393)$	p	η^2_p
Gender	23.78	<.001	.057	14.97	<.001	.037
Developmental stage	19.79	<.001	.048	22.50	<.001	.054
Gender × developmental stage	5.57	.019	.014	6.39	.012	.016

Note. η^2_p = partial eta squared.

girls during middle adolescence ($p < .001$), whereas no significant gender differences were observed during late adolescence ($p = .082$). Likewise, boys reported significantly lower legitimizing attitudes during late adolescence than during middle adolescence ($p < .001$), whereas the difference across developmental stages among girls was not statistically significant ($p = .067$). A similar pattern emerged for legitimizing attitudes toward physical violence (Figure 1). Significant main effects were observed for gender, $F(1, 393) = 14.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .037$, and developmental stage, $F(1, 393 = 22.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .054$. These effects were also qualified by a significant gender × developmental stage interaction, $F(1, 393) = 6.39$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2_p = .016$. Boys reported significantly higher legitimizing attitudes than girls during middle adolescence ($p < .001$),

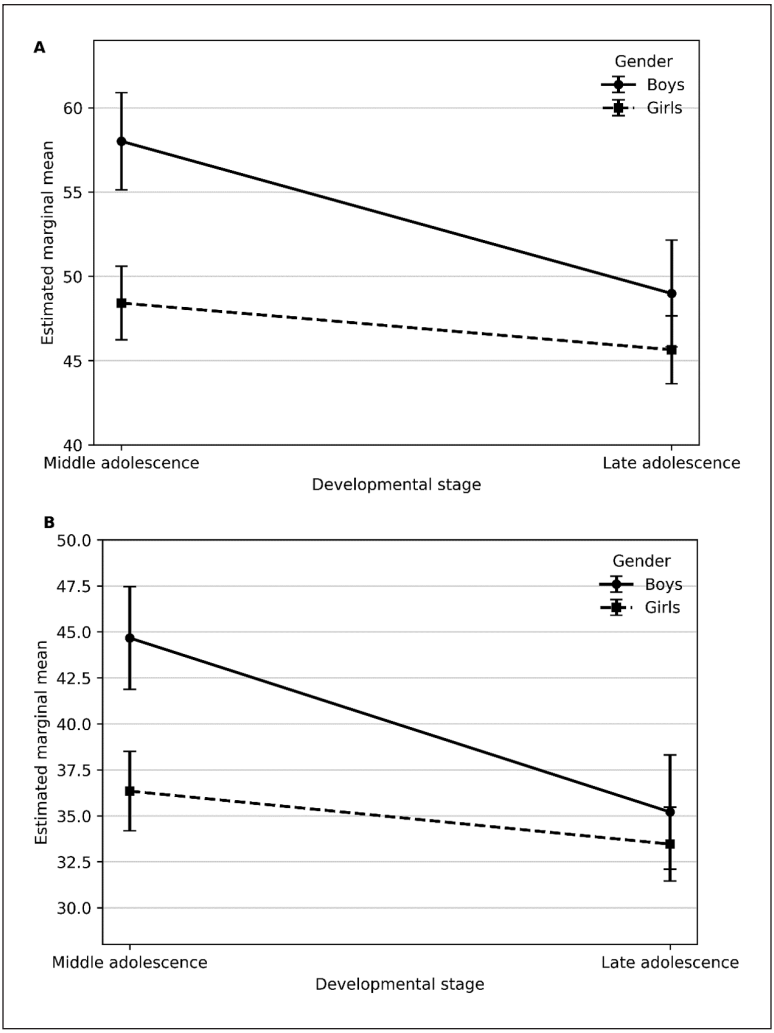


Figure 1. Estimated marginal means illustrating the interaction between gender and developmental stage on legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence.
Note. (A) depicts legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence, and (B) depicts legitimizing attitudes toward physical violence. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

whereas no significant gender differences emerged during late adolescence ($p = .355$). Similarly, boys reported significantly lower legitimizing attitudes during late adolescence than during middle adolescence ($p < .001$), whereas

Table 5. Results of the Multivariate Analysis of Variance Examining the Effects of Gender and Developmental Stage on Dating Violence Perpetration and Victimization.

Effect	Pillai's trace	$F(2, 276)$	p	η^2_p
Gender	0.002	0.31	.737	.002
Developmental stage	0.002	0.23	.794	.002
Gender × developmental stage	0.006	0.87	.419	.006

Note. η^2_p = partial eta squared.

Table 6. Correlations Among Dating Violence, Legitimizing Attitudes Toward Dating Violence and Neuroticism and Agreeableness Traits.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perpetration	—					
2. Victimization	.572***	—				
3. L. A. Psy. V.	.314***	.010	—			
4. L. A. Phy. V.	.386***	.116[a]	.766***	—		
5. Neuroticism	.164**	.246***	.004	.037	—	
6. Agreeableness	−.142*	.031	−.302***	−.269***	.212***	—

Note. 1 = global perpetration; 2 = global victimization; 3 = legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence; 4 = legitimizing attitudes toward physical violence; 5 = neuroticism; 6 = agreeableness.
[a]Marginally significant correlation ($p = .054$).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

the difference among girls did not reach statistical significance ($p = .055$). As Figure 1 illustrates, legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence decreased across developmental stages in both genders, although the decline was substantially steeper among boys.

A 2 × 2 MANOVA was subsequently conducted to examine the effects of gender, developmental stage and their interaction on overall dating violence perpetration and victimization (see Table 5). No significant multivariate effects were observed for gender, Pillai's trace ($V = 0.002$, $F(2, 276) = 0.31$, $p = .737$; developmental stage, $V = 0.002$, $F(2, 276) = 0.23$, $p = .794$; or the gender × developmental stage interaction, $V = 0.006$, $F(2, 276) = 0.87$, $p = .419$.

Pearson correlations (see Table 6) showed strong positive associations between perpetration and victimization ($r = .572$, $p < .001$) and moderate positive correlations between perpetration and legitimizing attitudes toward psychological ($r = .314$, $p < .001$) and physical violence ($r = .386$, $p < .001$).

Table 7. Summary of the Hierarchical Multiple Regression Model for Dating Violence Perpetration With Predictor Variables Legitimizing Attitudes Toward Psychological and Physical Violence and Neuroticism and Agreeableness Traits.

Summary of hierarchical multiple regression models[a]					Incremental changes in explained variance between models				
Model	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	p	ΔR^2	ΔF	df	df	Δp
1[b]	.062	.055	8.90	<.001	.062	8.90	2	268	<.001*
2[c]	.161	.149	12.79	<.001	.099	15.72	2	266	<.001*

[a]Dependent variable: global perpetration.
[b]Predictors: neuroticism and agreeableness.
[c]Predictors: neuroticism, agreeableness, legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence.
*$p < .001$

Psychological and physical legitimizing attitudes were strongly intercorrelated ($r = .766$, $p < .001$). Neuroticism was weakly positively correlated with perpetration ($r = .164$, $p = .006$) and victimization ($r = .246$, $p < .001$). Agreeableness correlated weakly negatively with perpetration ($r = -.142$, $p = .017$) and moderately negatively with legitimizing attitudes toward psychological ($r = -.302$, $p < .001$) and physical violence ($r = -.269$, $p < .001$). A weak positive correlation was also found between neuroticism and agreeableness ($r = .212$, $p < .001$). Regarding victimization, Pearson correlation analyses revealed no significant associations with legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence ($r = .010$, $p = .867$) or physical violence ($r = .116$, $p = .054$). Similarly, agreeableness did not show a significant relationship with victimization ($r = .031$, $p = .610$). Given the lack of bivariate associations for these variables, hierarchical regression models for victimization were not pursued, as the statistical criteria to justify their inclusion as predictors were not met.

Spearman's rho correlations were additionally conducted as sensitivity analyses and yielded an equivalent pattern of results, supporting the robustness of the correlational findings.

Finally, hierarchical multiple regression (see Tables 7 and 8) showed that personality traits explained 6% of the variance in perpetration, $F(2, 268) = 8.87$, $p < .001$. The inclusion of legitimizing attitudes significantly increased the explained variance to 16%, $\Delta R^2 = .099$, $\Delta F(2, 266) = 15.72$, $p < .001$. In the final model, bootstrapped estimates (2,000 resamples; 95% BCa confidence intervals) indicated that neuroticism ($\beta = .204$, $p = .003$, 95% BCa CI [0.238, 0.844]) and legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence ($\beta = .186$, $p = .047$ [0.002, 0.056]) were positively associated with perpetration. Agreeableness ($\beta = -.059$, $p = .437$ [−0.588, 0.268]) and legitimizing attitudes toward physical violence ($\beta = .166$, $p = .111$ [−0.004, 0.065]) were

Table 8. Hierarchical Regression Coefficients for Dating Violence Perpetration (Bootstrapped Estimates).

Hierarchical multiple models	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*	95% BCa CI
Model 1					
Constant	1.312	0.651		.045*	[0.074, 2.614]
Neuroticism	0.615	0.185	.234	.002*	[0.270, 0.969]
Agreeableness	−0.444	0.231	−.157	.050*	[−0.911, −0.001]
Model 2					
Constant	−1.793	0.880		.043*	[−3.542, −0.098]
Neuroticism	0.537	0.169	.204	.003*	[0.238, 0.844]
Agreeableness	−0.166	0.209	−.059	.437	[−0.588, 0.268]
L. A. Psy. V.	0.030	0.014	.186	.047*	[0.002, 0.056]
L. A. Phy. V.	0.029	0.018	.166	.111	[−0.004, 0.065]

Note. Bootstrap estimates are based on 2,000 resamples. *B* = unstandardized coefficient; *SE* = standard error; β = standard coefficient; CI = confidence interval; BCa = bias-corrected and accelerated.
*$p \leq .05$

not significantly associated with perpetration, as their confidence intervals included zero.

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on dating violence by focusing on adolescence, a developmental period characterized by heightened vulnerability to maladaptive relational patterns and the consolidation of beliefs and behaviors that may persist into adulthood. Understanding dating violence within this population is therefore particularly critical, not only due to its immediate impact but also because of its potential long-term implications for relational functioning.

Within this context, this study advances the understanding of dating violence among adolescents, situating its prevalence within recent evidence of an upward trend (Beckmann et al., 2021; Dosil et al., 2020; Magalhães et al., 2025; Portugal et al., 2023). Although international estimates suggest that roughly one third of adolescents experience some form of dating violence (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021), European studies report markedly higher rates, ranging from 57% to 66% across Spain, Sweden and Portugal, indicating that the phenomenon is not limited to Southern Europe (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Magalhães et al., 2025; Villanueva-Blasco et al., 2025). Consistent with these

findings, the present study shows that approximately 57% of adolescents reported perpetrating violence against a partner and nearly 59% reported victimization in the past year. These figures contrast with Portugal's official data (Secretaria Geral do Ministério da Administração Interna, 2024), which indicate a higher incidence among adults (93% of those reported and more than 61% of victims are over 25 years old), suggesting that less visible forms of violence, such as verbal aggression or control, may be perceived as acceptable and therefore underreported (Taquette & Monteiro, 2019). Feelings of shame, fear of reprisal or stigmatization also hinder reporting these episodes (Silva et al., 2023). Consistent with prior research (Beckmann et al., 2021; Dosil et al., 2020; Exner-Cortens et al., 2021; Magalhães et al., 2025; Neves et al., 2021; Rey-Anacona et al., 2022; Villanueva-Blasco et al., 2025; Ybarra & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2019), verbal/emotional violence emerged as the most common form, underscoring its central role in the escalation of dating violence (Krishnakumar et al., 2018). While verbal/emotional violence predominated, sexual violence showed a different pattern, with lower prevalence in perpetration but higher in victimization. This finding echoes concerns that adolescence is a stage of heightened vulnerability due to limited relational experience, emotional immaturity and insufficient sexual education (Caridade, 2025). These factors may foster permissive interpretations of abusive behavior and hinder recognition of abuse (Caridade et al., 2020; Dion et al., 2023).

As noted in other studies (Cava et al., 2023; Neves et al., 2021; Ybarra & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2019), adolescents do not demonstrate agreement with legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence. However, a more detailed analysis reveals a certain discrepancy between attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, although legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence were only agreed upon by 0.3% of young people, and only when it came to legitimizing psychological violence, almost 60% of young people reported having perpetrated or been the target of violence in the last year, regardless of frequency. Although adolescents reject dating violence at the attitudinal level, their engagement in such behaviors can be understood through internal mechanisms of cognitive regulation, an explanation provided by Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. This theory suggests that, whether as perpetrators or victims, adolescents adjust their beliefs to minimize psychological discomfort (e.g., self-concept or negative consequences) caused by the incongruence between attitudes and behaviors. To minimize this dissonance, they often rely on self-justifying explanations—such as contextualizing the act as impulsive, rationalizing their intentions and trivializing its consequences—which allow them to maintain a positive self-concept despite violent conduct. These mechanisms have been widely documented in the literature (Capaldi

et al., 2012; Cava et al., 2023; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Mattson et al., 2021; Saial et al., 2026; Silva et al., 2023; Vagi et al., 2013).

Concerning the comparative analyses, the multivariate results indicated no significant differences in overall dating violence perpetration or victimization according to gender, developmental stage or their interaction. These findings are with previous studies reporting reciprocal patterns of aggression in adolescent dating relationships (Mattson et al., 2021; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2023; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019; Villanueva-Blasco et al., 2025). Indeed, scientific investment has contributed significantly to raising social and political awareness about the severity of dating violence, although, in some contexts, social pressure driven by high prevalence rates preceded and fueled this progress. In the Portuguese context, such awareness led to legislative changes. Previously limited to spouses, Article 152 of the Penal Code was revised in 2007 to explicitly include dating violence and violence between former partners, extending protection to both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. At the same time, public entities and non-governmental organizations, previously focused on remedial responses to victims, have expanded prevention efforts targeting youth, grounded in scientific evidence (Caridade & Machado, 2013). A different pattern emerged for legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence. For both legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence, boys reported higher legitimizing attitudes than girls during middle adolescence, whereas these gender differences were no longer observed during late adolescence. Likewise, legitimizing attitudes toward both psychological and physical violence decreased significantly from middle to late adolescence among boys, whereas no significant developmental changes were observed among girls. These findings suggest that the association between gender and legitimizing attitudes is not constant across adolescence, but varies according to developmental stage. Although longitudinal studies are needed to confirm these developmental trajectories, the observed pattern may suggest that violence-supportive beliefs become less pronounced across adolescence among boys, whereas girls appear to maintain comparatively low and stable levels of legitimizing attitudes throughout both developmental stages. This pattern may reflect developmental gains in socio-cognitive maturity and emotional regulation, together with changing peer influences across adolescence (Bowen & Walker, 2015; Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Rose, 2015; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2023), while the higher endorsement observed among boys during middle adolescence may additionally reflect the influence of traditional gender norms that associate masculinity with dominance and aggression (Caridade & Machado, 2013; Neves et al., 2018; Reyes et al., 2016; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021).

The correlation results validate theoretical and empirical patterns previously identified in the literature on dating violence, personality traits and legitimizing attitudes. A strong association was observed between global perpetration and victimization of dating violence, indicating a bidirectional relationship between these two dimensions. These findings can suggest that adolescents involved in violent dynamics often alternate between the roles of perpetrator and victim (Ludin et al., 2017; Piolanti et al., 2023; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Valdivia-Salas et al., 2022). As found in different studies (Beckmann et al., 2021; Borges et al., 2020; Capaldi et al., 2012; Cava et al., 2023; Fernández-González et al., 2018; García-Carpintero-Muñoz et al., 2023; Ludin et al., 2017; Ybarra & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2019), a significant association was identified between global perpetration and legitimizing attitudes toward both psychological and physical dating violence. These results support the notion that adolescents who justify, accept or tolerate dating violence are more likely to reproduce such attitudes in their relationships, highlighting a link between attitudes and behaviors. However, no association was found between global victimization and legitimizing attitudes, which may indicate that victimization is more closely related to contextual and psychological vulnerability factors (Capaldi et al., 2012; Ludin et al., 2017) or situational conditions (Mattson et al., 2021; Vagi et al., 2013). The strong correlation between legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence can indicate the coexistence of these forms of legitimization. In this sense, the acceptance of one type of violence may predispose the acceptance of others (Vagi et al., 2013), as they are underpinned by beliefs and values that justify violence as a strategy for control or conflict resolution in intimate relationships (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Mattson et al., 2021). Personality traits also showed significant relationships with dating violence. The positive association between neuroticism and both perpetration and victimization may be understood in light of the emotional instability, heightened negative affect, need for control and difficulties in emotion regulation, characteristics of this trait (Hines & Saudino, 2008; Ulloa et al., 2016). Adolescents with higher levels of neuroticism may react more strongly to interpersonal stressors, which can be associated with conflict escalation and aggressive responses in terms of perpetration, but, simultaneously, may relate to a greater vulnerability to coercive or unstable relational dynamics, thereby contributing to the risk of victimization. Within the GAM, such dispositional tendencies influence internal states by shaping immediate affective and cognitive appraisals. These, in turn, may bias the interpretation of relational cues, potentially leading to maladaptive responses and involvement in mutually conflictual dating dynamics (Barlett & Anderson, 2012; DeWall et al., 2011; Ulloa et al., 2016). In contrast, agreeableness

was negatively associated with perpetration, which may reflect the role of empathy, cooperativeness and concern for others in inhibiting aggressive responses (Hines & Saudino, 2008; Ulloa et al., 2016). Within the GAM, such characteristics may reduce the accessibility of hostile cognitions and the likelihood of engaging in aggressive behaviors (Barlett & Anderson, 2012; DeWall et al., 2011; Ulloa et al., 2016). The absence of a significant association with victimization, however, suggests that, while prosocial tendencies may limit the enactment of violence, they do not necessarily alter adolescent's exposure to aggression from others. Further correlations revealed negative associations between agreeableness and legitimizing attitudes toward psychological and physical violence. These results support the idea that more empathetic, compassionate and cooperative adolescents tend to reject violence as acceptable or as a means of resolving intimate conflicts (Chen et al., 2024; Ulloa et al., 2016). The lack of a significant relationship between neuroticism and legitimizing attitudes contradicts the trend in the literature (DeWall et al., 2011; Ulloa et al., 2016) but is consistent with the findings of Barlett and Anderson (2012), who identified an association between neuroticism and physical aggression, but not with aggressive attitudes. In this study, as in those authors' findings, agreeableness was associated with both violent behaviors and legitimizing attitudes toward violence. These findings suggest that low levels of agreeableness, characterized by selfishness, distrust and confrontational tendencies, may increase the risk of violent behaviors and attitudes, whereas high levels of neuroticism may foster violent behaviors through emotional impulsivity, but not through the endorsement of legitimizing attitudes, which presuppose underlying beliefs and values.

Finally, the hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that, after controlling for neuroticism and agreeableness, legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence were significantly associated with perpetration. The present findings illustrate how dispositional and socio-cognitive factors jointly relate to dating violence within a single analytic model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Barlett & Anderson, 2012; DeWall et al., 2011). In the first model, personality traits explained 6% of the variance in perpetration, with neuroticism emerging as the most robust predictor, reflecting a tendency toward heightened affect and emotional reactivity, which may be associated with more conflictual responses in intimate contexts (Hines & Saudino, 2008; Ulloa et al., 2016). Although agreeableness was initially significant, its contribution was attenuated with the inclusion of legitimizing attitudes, which may suggest an indirect or mediating effect. In this sense, less agreeable individuals are more likely to adopt attitudes that justify violence, and, when these attitudes are included in the model, they appear to mediate or absorb the impact of agreeableness, which might explain the loss of its direct

contribution to perpetration (Hines & Saudino, 2008). Among legitimizing attitudes, psychological violence showed a significant contribution to perpetration, whereas legitimizing attitudes toward physical violence did not remain significant. This difference may reflect the perception that physical violence is a more extreme and less justifiable approach to managing intimate conflicts (Mattson et al., 2021), whereas psychological violence, being shaped by more permissive sociocultural norms, is supported by beliefs and values that allow its acceptance as a legitimate form of conflict resolution (Capaldi et al., 2012; Cava et al., 2023; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Ybarra & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2019). Neuroticism and legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence emerged as the most robust predictors of perpetration in the present study, reflecting complementary person-level influences. In light of the GAM framework, neuroticism may be understood as a dispositional input associated with emotional dysregulation, conferring a general vulnerability to adolescents' maladaptive responses in interpersonal conflict (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall et al., 2011; Ulloa et al., 2016). In contrast, legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence represent evaluative beliefs and values that shape how adolescents interpret relational situations, potentially justifying or normalizing perpetration behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Barlett & Anderson, 2012; DeWall et al., 2011). The inclusion of legitimizing attitudes in the final model increased the explained variance to 16%, underscoring their comparatively stronger contribution to perpetration. This pattern suggests that, beyond the dispositional characteristics of personality traits, legitimizing attitudes may play a more prominent role in the understanding of dating violence perpetration. Within the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall et al., 2011), this finding suggests that, although dispositional traits may confer a general propensity toward perpetration, socio-cognitive evaluations regarding perpetration are more closely related to how adolescents make sense of and respond to specific conflict situations.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The absence of an association between legitimizing attitudes and victimization limits the understanding of how beliefs about violence relate to experiences of victimization, suggesting the need for future research to explore whether victims' explicit rejection of abusive behaviors influences this lack of association. In addition, the instrument used to assess legitimizing attitudes (EAVN) may not capture certain emotional, contextual or situational dimensions underlying the justification of violent behaviors, indicating the importance of developing

instruments that encompass these facets and of complementing quantitative data with qualitative approaches. Similarly, the choice of the Mini-IPIP to assess personality traits may have left out other potentially relevant dimensions, such as hostility, emphasizing the need for future studies to employ broader personality measures like the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 2000). The lack of association between agreeableness and victimization should be interpreted with caution. This finding may be influenced by measurement limitations, modest reliability in personality trait subscales or the sample's gender imbalance, suggesting that the non-protective role of this trait remains a preliminary observation. The Neuroticism and Agreeableness subscales of the Mini-IPIP demonstrated lower internal consistency than conventional thresholds. This is expected for brief measures and has been observed in previous adolescent research (Downey et al., 2014; Ďuricová & Poliach, 2023). Nevertheless, the reduced reliability may have attenuated the strength of observed associations, and caution is warranted when interpreting findings involving these traits. Also, the exclusion of the sexual violence attitude subscales of the EAVN limits the comprehensiveness of the assessment of legitimizing attitudes toward dating violence and should be considered when interpreting the findings. Although the hierarchical regression model explained 16% of the variance in perpetration, a substantial proportion remained unexplained, underscoring the relevance of including additional variables in future research. These could encompass factors related to psychological vulnerability (e.g., self-esteem, attachment style), contextual influences (e.g., history of abuse, exposure to parental violence) and situational aspects (e.g., substance use). Also, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes causal conclusions. While hierarchical regression allowed for examination of predictive relationships, longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to establish temporal and causal associations among personality traits, legitimizing attitudes and dating violence perpetration. Furthermore, the present study did not assess cyber dating violence, reflecting a measurement constraint associated with the instruments used, which focus on offline behaviors and attitudes. This omission is relevant given growing evidence that this form of dating violence is both prevalent and closely associated with offline manifestations (Arriba et al., 2024; Machado et al., 2022; Saial et al., 2025). Future research should therefore integrate online and offline dimensions of violence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of dating violence among adolescents. Subsequent studies should also examine the potential mediating or moderating role of legitimizing attitudes in the relationship between personality traits and dating violence perpetration. Additionally, the gender imbalance (66.8% female) may have constrained the statistical power of comparative analyses and could limit the

generalizability of the findings to the broader male population. This imbalance, likely a result of the combined snowball and convenience sampling strategies, suggests that the identified patterns should be interpreted with caution regarding male adolescents. Furthermore, small sample sizes for certain sexual orientation groups also prevented meaningful subgroup comparisons. Future research should therefore aim for more balanced and representative samples. The use of global scales for legitimizing attitudes, though supported by strong internal consistency, may have reduced specificity regarding the gender of the violence target. Retaining the original subscales is recommended. An additional limitation concerns the cultural specificity of the findings. Since the evidence and theoretical models used are primarily rooted in Western contexts, the results may not reflect the developmental trajectories of adolescents from different cultural backgrounds, particularly regarding the timing and nature of sexual and emotional intimacy. Finally, the exclusive reliance on self-report, which is vulnerable to social desirability bias, may have led to underreporting of perpetration and overreporting of victimization, as illustrated by the discrepancy between sexual perpetration (2.4%) and victimization (10.7%). Future studies may mitigate this bias by triangulating data collection methods, such as incorporating peer or partner reports, to achieve a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of adolescent dating violence dynamics.

Conclusion

This study highlights the high prevalence of dating violence, underscoring the urgent need for prevention and awareness programs targeting adolescents in educational, recreational and health settings. While, at the descriptive level, psychological violence, particularly in its verbal and emotional forms, emerged as the most frequented reported behavior, legitimizing attitudes toward psychological violence made a significant contribution to the dating violence perpetration. This highlights the importance of challenging beliefs that normalize such behaviors while promoting assertive communication, active listening and conflict-management skills. The interaction between gender and developmental stage suggests that middle adolescence may represent a particularly relevant period for preventive interventions targeting adolescents' beliefs about dating violence. Gender differences in legitimizing attitudes toward both psychological and physical dating violence were evident only during middle adolescence, whereas these differences were no longer observed during late adolescence, because only boys exhibited a significant decline in legitimizing attitudes across developmental stages. Although longitudinal research is needed to confirm these developmental patterns, the findings suggest that prevention programs

implemented during middle adolescence may be particularly well positioned to challenge violence-supportive beliefs, before they become more firmly established. Integrating evidence-based relationship education into school curricula, alongside interventions that promote critical reflection on gender norms, healthy relationships and non-violent conflict resolution, may represent a promising strategy for reducing adolescents' acceptance of dating violence. Finally, the findings suggest that agreeableness may play a role in lessening the propensity for perpetration, whereas neuroticism is associated with increased risk of both perpetration and victimization. These observed associations highlight the potential value of interventions that strengthen empathy, cooperation and interpersonal sensitivity, alongside emotional regulation and self-control, to address the bidirectional violent dynamics among adolescents.

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Ethical Considerations

All the procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, as well as the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Madeira (No. 10084399).

Consent to Participate

An informed consent form was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and their legal guardians.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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